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SUBJECT: BIOTECH OUTREACH EVENT

REF: STATE 018040

¶1. Post appreciates the support extended by BFIF to support the outreach event of the Science and Technology Advisor held on February 23, 2009. The visit was organized to increase awareness of the safety and benefits of biotechnology; dispel inaccurate beliefs concerning use of biotechnology and GM products; and encourage the government to adopt realistic regulations that encourage the importation and use of GM products and technologies, particularly those from the U.S. The outreach event focused on engaging key officials involved in agriculture and biotechnology about the latest biotech developments, including how Sri Lanka can benefit from the adoption of the technology which is being extensively promoted by both developing and developed nations. The overall goal was to lay the groundwork for more pro-GM and biotech policies that will allow for greater U.S. exports to Sri Lanka.

¶2. Programmatic Outcome: The outreach event was held at a leading hotel in Colombo and was attended by around 70 officials, including scientists, Department of Agricultural and other ministry officials, regulators, the private sector, and academics. Heads of various institutions involved in Sri Lanka's biotech discussions were among those who attended, including: the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya; the Director of Council for Agriculture Research Policy (CARP); the Director of the Post Graduate Institute of Agriculture, Kandy; the Director of the Food Control Unit, Ministry of Health; the Chairman of the National Science Foundation; the Director of Plant Protection; and the Director of Biosafety, Ministry of Environment.

¶3. The program commenced with a summary of the local biotechnology situation presented by the chairman of the Council for Agriculture Research Policy (CARP), which is the apex body for agriculture biotechnology in Sri Lanka.

¶4. Science Advisor Fedoroff provided a comprehensive presentation on biotechnology and how the technology has evolved in the U.S. and other major agriculture economies in both developed and developing countries. She emphasized that stringent regulations are imposed by U.S. federal agencies, requiring comprehensive testing and trial of crops prior to release for commercial planting. She also underscored that biotech and GM crops have a proven safety record with no adverse reactions in humans since production started on a commercial scale 12 years ago.

¶5. The attendees participated actively in the event, raising in particular numerous questions concerning the safety of biotechnology and GM foods. There was wide consensus about the need to more aggressively adopt biotechnology in Sri Lanka while implementing the necessary biosafety protocols to streamline the application of the technology. Local officials also acknowledged the problem of arbitrary use of pesticides and insecticides by farmers, which are causing adverse health effects. According to agricultural officials, pest and virus resistant crops are areas that biotechnology could be particularly useful in Sri Lanka.

¶6. Expenditure Report: Hall hire (with audio visual facilities) for 70 participants: \$552.00

COMMENT:

¶7. The support of BFIF has proved vital for post's commercial and outreach activities in Sri Lanka and Maldives. The propagation and advancement of U.S. policy on biotechnology and GM will hopefully help ease regulations that currently inhibit exports of U.S. agricultural products to the country, while also helping to advance the development of domestic agriculture.

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